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## DISCUSSION

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### A WORD OF PROTEST

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Much is being said on the subject of English in the preparatory schools. Ardent demands are made for training which will produce self-reliant, thinking students for our colleges. It was therefore a little perplexing to read a recent article from Wellesley College<sup>1</sup> urging our secondary schools to further research work in English. It would seem that it is time for the teachers of the high schools to remonstrate, or at least to raise a large question. What are we to understand? Shall we try to make pseudo-professors of our fun-loving, quick-witted, restless American youth? Or shall we let the theories spin on, and meet the boy or girl where he stands, and through any initiative possible lead him to find his own thought, and make use of it?

He is to be an able writer; must understand the principles of grammar; must spell, punctuate, and paragraph correctly; must be familiar with some ten books and have an exhaustive knowledge of some five others. This literature study must involve the study of words: derivatives, pronunciations, definitions, and synonyms; the study of references—historical, geographical, and mythological; the study of literary forms; including such subdivisions as the elegy.

Now, from one of our popular colleges the lament goes up that our pupils should learn to annotate their own editions, or at least be taught to verify the annotations that are set before them; otherwise they will never “read with scholarly precision and self-reliance.” Is it necessarily studying with self-reliance to know the best sources of information? Might the result not be a thing of shreds and patches? Is not the fundamental process the training of the unifying consciousness that it may sense the relationships of thought? Which process should be emphasized in the high school—the desire and ability to run to books for information, or the information provided, the study of the relations in the seamless robe of the thought-weaving?

We are told they should know the best histories of America, of England, and of the world. How many schools have proper equipment for such study? How many college graduates always know exactly where to look for the desired information? How many agree as to which are the best authorities? Is it because of the annotations provided for them that the pupils are unable to work

<sup>1</sup> “The Practical Side of Preparation in Literature,” by Martha Hale Shackford, *School Review*, March, 1906.

independently, or is it because no thought initiative has been awakened in them? Take into consideration the number of pupils that come from towns and small cities, and the varied interests knocking at the door of their consciousness, what are the possible and practical appeals in order to obtain from them the individual impulse? Why shouldn't the colleges teach the mysteries of reference books? Is not the lament strained that the high-school pupil when he enters college is not prepared to annotate his own books? What high-school pupil would appreciate the task of verifying the notes that have been given to him? Much compulsion would be necessary; you would need a rattan over every pupil. On the whole, would this make fine men and women, or lovers of good literature?

Meantime, where are the boys and girls who are fed on this assortment academic? Are they learning to love the art of noble reading? Do they think as they read? Do they take the study into their life-thought, or are they trying to hide behind the tattered academic robes and pretend that their poor, little noddles are full of wisdom? In such a course the really strong pupils will be found on the dissenter's bench.

Truly "of much learning there is no end." A new idea is advanced, a suggestion is made by some college, and the great army of secondary-school teachers follow like foolish sheep the bell-wether of the flock. The real aims of the teaching become confused as the demands become seemingly more and more complex. On the one hand, are the various academic boards passing judgment on the youthful applicants crammed for their approval; and, on the other hand, if the teacher be not yet stereotyped into a tool for these officials, there is a strong, clear appeal of common-sense, and the ready sympathy and interest of the wide-awake American boy or girl.

The sanity of our secondary schools depends on the balance and adjustment which the teacher may make between these conflicting forces. There should be no conflict. The sham and artificiality of pedantic taste should not be applied in secondary schools. Let us spare the children. Let us keep them wholesome, sincere, earnest; not crushed under the accumulated force of our mass of compiled information. If they know the names innumerable of the many who have wrestled with a given thought, what impulse have they to respond with the freshness of a whole mind—a mind untrammelled, unstained, unfettered? Would the colleges not be satisfied if we turn to them boys and girls who perhaps have had narrow experience with books—at least so it would seem to the college professor—but who are nevertheless earnest and full of enthusiasm, doing their individual thinking with a simplicity and self-reliance which ring a note of challenge to the artificial training?

What, then, are to be the aims? Let us face them in simplicity and truth, and question our means. Surely, we should all agree that the candidate should be able to write simple and vigorous English, coherent in thought and not deficient in form. If beyond that he has gained any appreciation of the artistic, feels the satisfying beauty of unity and proportion, he is the better prepared to

value his college course. In the literature work should not the aim be the thorough and thoughtful enjoyment of the work in hand? How many people enjoy reading literature, if they have not only to look up innumerable classical references, but also to memorize the same? It is the exceptional pupil who survives this process and carries with him a sense of the unity and beauty of the whole composition he is studying. So the question arises: Which is the appropriate work for pupils of the high-school age—the study of the literature as a compendium to universal knowledge, or the study of each masterpiece as an illustration of very beautiful constructive principles, thought-relations, and illuminating instances? I have never known a class to fail in active, enthusiastic response to this broad study of the thought-problems. If the work be the drama, the structure of the play, the plot primary and the plot secondary, the relative use of climax, and the binding together of the acts, all of these structural principles appeal to the young student. The interest in characters and their interrelation never wanes; and if they are taught to keep a record of these developments and relations, many a lesson of real truth is involved. It is the same in the study of the oration and the formal essay. If the vital human questions are kept in the foreground, the reality of the work and its first-hand interest make its valuable lessons of law and order and sequence of practical worth to the young writer.

The moment the separation in the English work begins, the pigeon-holing of composition from literature, and again from rhetoric, that moment begins the deadening of impulse. There is absolutely no separation. The leaf is not of interest apart from the parent stock; the whole is vital and resourceful. Pupils know when they are gaining a sense of power; when they begin to feel the possibility of really wanting to write something, and of really writing it in an effective way. There is no stimulus like the stimulus of attainment. The opportunity really to explain one's point of view in class, the assurance that everyone wants to hear and will wait for the full explanation, provides an initiative for thought-investigation. Could the colleges not spare their encyclopedic probing for the sake of getting young men and women alive to the beauty and force of literature, thinking themselves and eager to set forth their thought? I am convinced these results can be attained, if the colleges will stand for them, and help us to shake off the trammels of false processess. The child is not a philologist by nature. He likes the wide horizon and the free lance, and he will strike for the true side. There is no keener or more honest critic than our high-school student, nor one more frank in his maintenance of a cause.

Where is the starting-place for a result like this? To begin anywhere would mean to end anywhere, or, in other words, nowhere or in confusion. The beginning, then, is the all-important problem; for from the true beginning must unfold the full motive power of the language. Would you begin the study of music composition by the analysis of the great symphonies; or the study of practical architecture by diagramming the vast cathedrals of the Middle Ages? Should not the science of language, then, be taught as a continuous development

from its simplest unit of relation, as the youthful composer beginning with his simple melodic form, or the student architect with his simple relation of lines? Here, then, is where the teacher of English should take his stand for the initial work: in the simplest unit of thought-relations—the sentence. Here may be found all the great principles illustrated in the larger forms of composition. Here indeed, in miniature are all the forms of composition. Something said about something, involving unity, coherence, and emphasis, expansion, contraction, proportion, description, exposition, narration, and argument. Little good would it do the child for the teacher to orate on the valuable lessons involved; but so logical, so deductive, so symmetrical, so conceptive, are the grammatical principles that form the basis of our language that the high-school child may be led through skilful questioning, and the abundance and free use of illustrative material, to discover these wonderful formative laws, and to perform the task with joy. He takes no less pride in his language notebook than he does in his laboratory record of his experiments in physical science. It may not always have the completeness of the regulation textbook. It may be, as Touchstone said, “a poor thing, but mine own.” This work does not lack in interest, as has so long been charged to the conventional training in grammar. Furthermore, it incites in the pupil the right attitude toward the entire line of work. It is as pure as the study of mathematics and as artistic as the study of drawing. It combines richness and simplicity, and forms the beginning of an appreciation of beauty in literature. If a course is defined by its boundaries, this article may serve as constructive in suggestion, and thus not be subject to the common cavil of futile criticism. I cannot but have hope that out of the confused mass of opinion and dissatisfaction, or out of the grinding compliance, there may rise a teaching that shall be simple, original, and truthful, and not, at least at so early an age, clip the wings of youthful spontaneity.